

What is claimed is:

1. A set top box (STB) for decoding media streams from multiple sources, the STB comprising:

a processor;

5 a hardware decoder, coupled to the processor, for decoding media streams;

a first stream receiver configured to receive a media stream from a first

source;

a second stream receiver configured to receive a media stream from a second source; and

10 a stream selector having first and second inputs and an output, the first input coupled to the first stream receiver, the second input coupled to the second stream receiver, and the output coupled to the hardware decoder, wherein the stream selector is configured to selectively direct one of the media streams to the hardware decoder under control of the processor.

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2. The STB of claim 1, wherein at least one media stream comprises a Moving Picture Experts Group (MPEG) stream, and wherein the hardware decoder comprises an MPEG decoder.

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3. The STB of claim 1, wherein the first stream receiver comprises a video tuner.

4. The STB of claim 3, wherein the first source comprises a cable television source.

5. The STB of claim 1, wherein the second stream receiver comprises a 5 modem device.

6. The STB of claim 5, wherein the modem device comprises a Data Over Cable Service Interface Specification (DOCSIS) modem.

10 7. The STB of claim 5, wherein the second source comprises an Internet Protocol (IP) source.

8. The STB of claim 1, wherein the stream selector comprises a multiplexer having a select line coupled to the processor.

15 9. The STB of claim 1, further comprising:
an audio/video controller coupled to the hardware decoder for formatting media streams for presentation by an external display device; and
an output coupled to the hardware decoder for providing operable connection 20 to the external display device.

10. The STB of claim 1, further comprising a storage device, coupled to the processor, for storing at least one media stream.

11. A method in a set top box (STB) for decoding media streams from multiple sources, the STB comprising a hardware decoder and a processor, the method comprising:

- 5 receiving a first media stream from a first source;
- receiving a second media stream from a second source;
- using a stream selector, under control of the processor, to selectively direct one of the media streams to the hardware decoder for decoding.

10 12. The method of claim 11, wherein at least one media stream comprises a Moving Picture Experts Group (MPEG) stream, and wherein the hardware decoder comprises an MPEG decoder.

13. The method of claim 11, wherein the first media stream is received by
15 a video tuner within the STB.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein the first source comprises a cable television source.

20 15. The method of claim 11, wherein the second media stream is received by a modem device within the STB.

16. The method of claim 15, wherein the modem device comprises a Data Over Cable Service Interface Specification (DOCSIS) modem.

17. The method of claim 15, wherein the second source comprises an
5 Internet Protocol (IP) source.

18. The method of claim 11, wherein the stream selector comprises a multiplexer having a select line coupled to the processor.

10 19. The method of claim 11, further comprising formatting the selected media stream for presentation by an external display device.

20. The method of claim 11, further comprising storing at least one media stream in a storage device within the STB.

15 21. A companion device for enhancing a set top box for an entertainment system, the companion device comprising:

20 a processor;
a hardware decoder, coupled to the processor, for decoding media streams;
a first stream receiver, coupled to the set top box, for receiving a media stream therefrom;
a second stream receiver for receiving a media stream from an alternative source; and

5 a stream selector having first and second inputs and an output, the first input coupled to the first stream receiver, the second input coupled to the second stream receiver, and the output coupled to the hardware decoder, wherein the stream selector is configured to selectively direct one of the media streams to the hardware decoder under control of the processor.

10 22. The companion device of claim 21, wherein at least one media stream comprises a Moving Picture Experts Group (MPEG) stream, and wherein the hardware decoder comprises an MPEG decoder.

15 23. The companion device of claim 21, wherein the first stream receiver comprises a video tuner.

20 24. The companion device of claim 21, wherein the second stream receiver comprises a modem device.

25. The companion device of claim 24, wherein the modem device comprises a Data Over Cable Service Interface Specification (DOCSIS) modem.

26. The companion device of claim 24, wherein the second source comprises an Internet Protocol (IP) source.

27. The companion device of claim 21, wherein the stream selector comprises a multiplexer having a select line coupled to the processor.

28. The companion device of claim 21, further comprising:
5 an audio/video controller coupled to the hardware decoder for formatting media streams for presentation by an external display device; and an output coupled to the hardware decoder for providing operable connection to the external display device.

10 29. The companion device of claim 21, further comprising a storage device, coupled to the processor, for storing at least one media stream.

30. A set top box (STB) for decoding media streams from multiple sources,
15 the STB comprising:
processing means;
means, coupled to the processing means, for decoding media streams;
means for receiving a media stream from a first source;
means for receiving a media stream from a second source; and
20 stream selection means having first and second inputs and an output, the first input coupled to the means for receiving a media stream from the first source, the second input coupled to the means for receiving a media stream from a second source, and the output coupled to the decoding means, wherein the stream selection

means are configured to selectively direct one of the media streams to the decoding means under control of the processing means.

31. A multimedia communications apparatus comprising:

5 a receiver for receiving a video signal and a streaming media signal from a multimedia communications network;

a first processing path coupled to the receiving device for tuning to the video signal;

a second processing path coupled to the receiving device for demodulating 10 the streaming media signal;

a selector for selecting between an output of the first processing path and an output of the second processing path; and

a decoder for decoding selected output from the selector.

15 32. The multimedia communications apparatus of claim 31, wherein the receiver comprises a radio-frequency input coupled to a splitter, and the splitter comprises a first output coupled to the first processing path and a second output coupled to the second processing path.

20 33. The multimedia communications apparatus of claim 31, wherein the first processing path comprises a video tuner coupled to the first output of the splitter, and wherein the second processing path comprises a modem device coupled to the second output of the splitter.

34. The multimedia communications apparatus of claim 31, wherein the decoder comprises a hardware-based decoder.

5 35. The multimedia communications apparatus of claim 31, wherein the video and streaming media signals are both encoded using a same technique, and wherein the decoder includes capability to decode signals encoded using the same technique.

10 36. The multimedia communications apparatus of claim 35, wherein the same technique comprises an MPEG encoding technique.

37. The multimedia communications apparatus of claim 35, wherein the same technique comprises a Digicypher encoding technique.

15 38. The multimedia communications apparatus of claim 31, wherein the receiver is integrated with a set top box.

20 39. The multimedia communications apparatus of claim 31, wherein the receiver is integrated with a television set.

40. A multimedia communications apparatus comprising:

a receiver for receiving a video signal and a streaming media signal from a multimedia communications network;

5 a first processing path coupled to the receiving device for tuning to the video signal;

 a second processing path coupled to the receiving device for demodulating the streaming media signal;

 a first decoder for decoding output from the first processing path; and

 a second decoder for decoding output from the second processing path.

10 41. The multimedia communications apparatus of claim 40, wherein the first and second decoders comprise hardware-based decoders.